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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 002454

SIPDIS

DEPT OF INTERIOR PASS TO USGS  
DEPT PASS TO USAID

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [AEMR](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [TPHY](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: INADEQUATE CIVIL DEFENSE SYSTEM NEEDS REPAIR

REF: QUITO 0086

11. (U) Summary: Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and a propensity for flooding can cause widespread destruction in Ecuador and call for a robust emergency response system. Despite this fact, Ecuador's Office of Civil Defense (CD) remains unprepared for the possibility of a natural disaster. Attempting to overcome staffing, budgetary, and logistical limitations, the CD is seeking to improve capacity by working closely with municipalities and decentralizing emergency response functions. The US Mission will play a central role in this effort through new Milgroup and USAID programs. End Summary.

#### CURRENT THREATS

12. (U) Volcanic eruptions and earthquakes pose the greatest natural disaster threat to Ecuador. According to the Geophysical Institute in Quito, fifty-five potentially active volcanoes exist in Ecuador. Of these, five on the Ecuadorian mainland are currently active: Cotopaxi, Pinchincha, Reventador, Sangay, and Tungurahua. Pinchincha, Cotopaxi, and Reventador threaten Quito. Within the last seven years, falling ash from these three volcanoes have caused several deaths in Quito and closed Quito's international airport for up to 10 days at a time. Tungurahua, which last erupted in 1999 and shows new signs of activity, endangers the tourist town of Banos. Other potentially active volcanoes could erupt at any time, as was the case with the volcano Sierra Negra in the Galapagos, which forced several tourist sites to be closed when it erupted on October 22.

13. (U) While the press tends to focus on volcanic activity, according to the Director of the Geophysical Institute in Quito, Ing. Hugo Yepes, earthquakes would cause greater destruction. Because building codes are not enforced, Ing. Yepes believes that an earthquake of 6.6 or greater on the Richter scale and epicentered near a major city would trigger substantial damage. Earthquakes of magnitudes greater than 7.7 occurred four times during the last century in Ecuador, including one in 1942 that destroyed most reinforced concrete buildings in Guayaquil. Earthquakes of magnitude 3.5 and greater occur over 200 times each year.

#### INADEQUATE CIVIL DEFENSE SEEKS SOLUTIONS

14. (U) In the event of any natural disaster, Ecuador's Office of Civil Defense (CD) is responsible for coordinating the emergency response. Unfortunately, the CD is woefully unprepared to handle any major natural disaster (reftel). Its budget is minimal and staff lack training. Directors -- retired military -- rotate every 2 years, disrupting program continuity. Despite its country-wide responsibilities, the CD has only five staff members to operate offices in each of Ecuador's 22 provinces. Moreover, the distribution of supplies is encumbered by the fact that the CD's only warehouse is in Quito. Even the Director of the CD, General Jose Grijalva, admits that the CD is under-funded, overly centralized, and without the capacity to respond to major disasters.

15. (U) Meanwhile, Ecuador's poor infrastructure likely will hamper any response from the CD. The country's road system is underdeveloped and mudslides can easily block traffic on major inter-city roads. Dr. Yepes believes that hospitals, even if they survive an earthquake, are not equipped to handle the level of medical assistance required in a large-scale disaster. Meanwhile, the last public education campaign regarding emergency response procedures was conducted in 1996, meaning public awareness is low. With these shortcomings, the CD likely will have to call on the Ecuadorian military in the event of a major disaster. Given the CD's acknowledged lack of interagency communication, this poses even greater problems.

16. (U) Gen. Grijalva's response to the lack of funding and staff is to localize responsibility through municipal relationship agreements. The agreements would create

provincial juntas consisting of mayors and other community leaders. The juntas would work through presidentially-appointed governors to adapt the CD's emergency response plan for their particular region. According to Gen. Grijalva, the agreements would provide provinces a greater degree of autonomy in how emergency response would be carried out. While this addresses concerns about the CD being institutionally centralized, it does not provide additional funding to build local capacity, a critical issue as Ecuador's rural areas are very poor. With this in mind, Gen. Grijalva proposes drawing on Milgroup and USAID programs to fill the void.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM: USG ROLE

17. (SBU) A five-year Milgroup plan would facilitate the CD's decentralization efforts by funding Emergency Operation Centers in five strategic locations: Pichincha Province in the northern Sierra, Azuay Province in the southern Sierra, Guayas Province on the coast, Napo Province in the Amazon Basin and the Galapagos. Each center would house trained staff and necessary supplies. The Pichincha project also would create a National Center for Emergency Response to manage the new emergency response system. Drawing on a Civil Defense Operations Manual document provided to the CD earlier this year, Milgroup would provide training to CD staff and assist in the development of an emergency response exercise program to improve interagency coordination. Public concerns regarding the US Military's motives forced the GOE to call off a similar project in 2003. In order to avoid misunderstanding, the CD, Milgroup and USAID currently are working together to have USAID, as the recognized USG Humanitarian Assistance entity in Ecuador, serve as the public face of the project. USAID is currently developing legal documents to implement the program.

18. (U) Complementing the Milgroup effort, Gen. Grijalva has requested that USAID incorporate emergency response components into their existing programs. Short on details, Gen. Grijalva envisions USAID implementing rural development projects with an eye toward expanding regional disaster response capacity. USAID is currently in the initial stages of developing its FY2007 5-year strategy and is looking for opportunities within this strategy to link its efforts with disaster preparedness activities.

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